

MUHAMMAD AND AMERICA

Muslims are one of the fastest growing religious groups in the United States and among the most ethnically diverse. America's Muslim population has been estimated at between two and 10 million people. The generally accepted number of American Muslims today is about six to seven million.

Somewhat less than 50% of American Muslims are first generation immigrants, and in all generations, South Asian Muslims are about twice as numerous as Arab Muslims. African American Muslims are variously estimated to be from 30 to 45 percent of all Muslims in the country.

Most African-American Muslims practice mainstream Islam. A very much smaller number are members of the Nation of Islam. Before 1975, most African-American Muslims were followers of its founder, Elijah Muhammad. The teachings of this group diverged dramatically from Islam as practiced everywhere else in the world, and included separatist, race-based, and militant strategies as well as rites and rituals invented by Elijah Muhammad. After his death in 1975, the great majority followed Elijah's son, Wallace, into mainstream Islam. Three years later, a small number of people led by Louis Farrakhan separated from Wallace to revive the Nation of Islam, including certain of Elijah Muhammad's original anti-white and separatist doctrines.

American Muslims, indigenous or not, are generally well educated and a large percentage of the adults vote.

To varying degrees, most American Muslims face many of the same challenges as other minority religions, including how to integrate into a mainstream culture while preserving their core values. This is further compounded by such Islamic practices as the hijab (covering of the hair by Muslim women), which is often perceived as oppressive or anti-American. Even the Muslim prayer and common Muslim phrases have become suspect in some quarters due to their slipshod association with terrorism. Post 9/11, American Muslims face extra challenges of negative stereotyping too. The World War II incarceration of over 100,000 Japanese American citizens hangs like a specter over the Muslim community today, and the power of guilt by association has persuaded many of them to vote and campaign proactively to protect their civil rights.

This is particularly upsetting to immigrant American Muslims, since many have reached these shores escaping religious and political oppression. Although the social norms of American society may be more permissive than some Muslims can approve, they nonetheless are able to practice their faith without hindrance and build and staff their mosques and schools without state interference.

Some Americans associate Islam with dictatorship, since so many Muslims live in countries that presently lack a real democratic process. Yet Muslims in the United States participate freely in a democracy without religious contradictions. Historically, the real obstacle to democracy in the traditional Muslim world has not been 'Islam.' It is poverty, lack of education, and corrupt and repressive regimes. Muslims living under oppressive regimes don't appear any happier with the arrangement than Americans would be; indeed, many Muslims have come here to escape them.

Muslims in America face a major challenge today: to distinguish themselves by word and deed from terrorist groups throughout the world that use Islam as a justification for violence and anarchy. America has experienced this kind of confusion before, as for instance in the Jim Crow decades of the segregated South, when the Ku Klux Klan used Biblical rhetoric and burning crosses to dress a violent manifesto in religious symbolism. American Muslims are no more sympathetic with Al-Qaeda and "Islamic" terrorism than most believing Christians were once supportive of the Klan.

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Muslim leaders, community centers, advocacy groups, and mosques have greatly increased their efforts to speak up, to explain their faith, and to define more publicly their place as American citizens. They often emphasize that:

- Islam, Judaism and Christianity are all monotheistic
- Islam advocates the right to participate in society, educate oneself, and pursue a profession.
- The Qur'an, on which Islamic laws are based, enjoins Muslims to govern themselves by discussion and consensus.
- Islam is institutionally egalitarian and its houses of worship are racially and ethnically integrated.
- The Pledge of Allegiance (one nation under God) and Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (all people are "created equal,") express themes that are also basic to Islam.